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5:15-6:30pm: Session 33. COMPARATIVE LITERATURE I: Neapolitan Influences, the American Male and Patriarchy: Past and Present in European, American and African Societies
Organized by Martha Hughes and Jorge W. Suazo, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro
Campus Chaired by Martha Hughes, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro Campus

5:30 pm—

Title: *A Pilgrim's Progress* for the Digital, Post-Human(ist) Age?: Social and Religious Allegory in Russell Banks's *Lost Memory of Skin*

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Status: accepted

Abstract:

In *Lost Memory of Skin* (2011), his twelfth novel, Russell Banks continues his exploration of the dark underbelly of American society—in this instance, the moral wilderness of a group of convicted sex offenders exiled to living beneath a concrete causeway in the south Florida city of Calusa, a fictionalized Miami. Banks, who has long been “our premier chronicler of the doomed and forgotten American male” (Schulman 8), focuses in *Lost* on a twenty-two-year-old parolee referred to throughout only as “The Kid.” While guilty and duly convicted of propositioning an underage girl online for sex, The Kid is still presented in the narrative not as a predator nor a victim of an overzealous judicial system, but as somehow all-too-representative. With a cast of other typologically-named characters, Banks follows an allegorical impetus in *Lost*, with the Kid on a spiritual journey to discover selfhood beyond the depersonalized, increasingly cyber reality that has engulfed him. Besides commenting upon “the injuries of class society” (Seguin), Banks manages in *Lost Memory of Skin* to employ a neo-realistic aesthetic while fostering a brand of “new humanism” for American fiction, which rejects some of those “post-human” tendencies and themes evidenced in many other contemporary novelists’ works.

In *Lost Memory of Skin*, his twelfth novel and seventeenth work of fiction in a career spanning nearly fifty years, Russell Banks continues to explore the dark underbelly of American society—here, the moral wilderness of a group of convicted sex offenders living beneath a concrete causeway in the south Florida city of Calusa, a fictionalized version of Miami. Banks has long been “our premier chronicler of the doomed and forgotten American male” (Schulman 8), from Bob DuBois in *Continental Drift* (1985) to Billy Ansel in *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), and in this regard *Lost Memory of Skin* is little different. The narrative concerns a twenty-two-year-old parolee—he was caught in a sting after propositioning an underage girl online and subsequently setting-up an assignation with her—who is referred to throughout only as “The

Kid.” However, this protagonist is presented not as a monstrous sexual predator nor as a victim of an overzealous judicial system, but as something or someone ambiguously in between, and perhaps all-too-typical, at that. In fact, there is a cast of other typologically-dubbed characters in the book, such as “The Professor,” who sees in The Kid a subject for a sociological experiment or “research project” (*LM* 131), as he calls it, and “The Writer” who, at the end, in partially telling The Kid’s story, also serves as a self-reflexive figure, if ironically so, for Banks himself. Much like Billy Pilgrim in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), “The Kid” represents a sort of spiritual innocent, despite being a perpetrator, on a quest for a meaningful emotional connection beyond the depersonalized cyber reality that has managed to engulf him. In this regard, then, there exists a parable-like, even allegorical thrust to *Lost Memory of Skin*, as the novelist “plot[s] key moments in [our] cultural devolution” in a story that shows just how far we have “fallen,” and how “redemption, in Banks’s America, is harder won than ever” (Schulman 8).

Banks’s fictions have long been recognized “for their realistic portrayals of disenfranchised, marginalized subjects, living on the fringes of history and along the back roads of American society” (O’Donnell 41), with “the social allegory offered by” his novels exposing “the culpabilities of an avaricious contemporaneity in post-1980s America and the spawning of a new lost generation” (O’Donnell 42), and The Kid’s story in *Lost*, with its economic and class determinants, attests to a similar thematic. To begin, and in terms of the allegorical character-types mentioned previously, there is much in The Kid of Chappie, the adolescent narrator of Banks’s 1995 novel *Rule of the Bone*: both are products of broken homes and willfully “neglectful” (*LM* 199), if not physically or sexually abusive, parents, and so take what little comfort they can find in the cheap substitutes for attention their cultures readily provide them.

For The Kid, abandoned by his father and uncared for by his single and promiscuous mother Adele, “it is no wonder that as a preteen without friends—except for his giant pet iguana, Iggy—[he] fell into the dark Oz of online porn to assuage his isolation and boredom” (Schulman 8). The Kid may be young and naive, but he is portrayed as far more introspective and self-conscious than most of the adults surrounding him, painfully aware that “he had no friends—only acquaintances—and no girlfriends and essentially no family either. [...] He might not have been raised by wolves exactly but he was a feral child” (*LM* 39, 30) nonetheless. From the start, The Kid recognizes that “He’s [just] a white guy in his early twenties. Otherwise he’s almost invisible” (*LM* 57). The Kid’s slow, anti-social progression includes essentially isolating himself at first in a make-shift room behind his mother’s house, maxing-out her credit cards to access hardcore Web sites, and for years, both before and even after he is discharged dishonorably from the Army at age twenty for planning to distribute pornography to fellow soldiers in an effort to win their favor, viewing Internet porn as the protective layer to his vulnerable inner self. What becomes The Kid’s nearly-complete absorption into cyberspace “kept him from loneliness and dismay and the explosive desperation that often follows hard upon. His computer kept him from turning violent and he was self-medicating with an addiction to pornography to the point where he was no longer using it to get high or hard but merely not to be bored or harmful to others” (*LM* 182). The Kid manages to survive his upbringing through a “usual compliant docility,” since “his old tried-and-true personality [was] like a turtle into his shell” (182). Again like Iggy (who meets a terrible end), The Kid is described as more reptilian than not, having “lost” the “memory of skin,” and the more broadly human, somewhere along the way. But unlike Iggy, pitifully the Kid “doesn’t even know what his natural self is” (*LM* 68). Later, The Professor (and perhaps Banks himself just behind him) will also come to see in The Kid a kind of “cultural

canary: a harbinger of how the Internet has warped and disconnected us, as the title suggests, from genuine sensual experience” (McGrath C.1).

However, all this self-imposed safety ends for The Kid when he meets a 14-year-old girl with the handle of “*brandi18*” in an online chat room, escalates their sexual banter, eventually shows-up for a date with her toting a backpack full of beer, condoms, and K-Y jelly, and is confronted by her father and then a SWAT team that takes The Kid down before any “real” or actual sex crime can occur. He explains this to The Professor in a later interview, but the narrator foreshadows The Kid’s conflict in telling terms: in meeting the girl, “He’d be dealing with reality this time. Not illusion. [...] He was about to bump up against and break through an invisible membrane between the perfectly controlled world locked inside his head and the endlessly overflowing unpredictable, dangerous world outside” (*LM* 222). Thus, in the novel’s present, The Kid’s reality as a convicted sex offender on parole--ironically, he is still a virgin, “yet another way Banks underscores his [protagonist’s] innocence (to use a loaded word)” (Schulman 8)—consists of being tracked by a GPS unit attached to his ankle for the next 10 years, and he is also forbidden, by state law, to leave the area or live within 2500 feet of anywhere children might gather or reside.

Practically-speaking, The Kid is left with few options but the dry spot beneath “The Causeway,” a veritable “leper colony” (*LM* 178) of other rag-tag sex offenders, like Rabbit, Paco, and The Shyster (another allegorically-tagged character), a former prominent state senator convicted of child sex crimes. This last pathetic excuse for a man is a “baby banger” (178), as the Kid calls such offenders. Yet it is The Shyster’s Bible that The Kid borrows and begins reading, for the first time, the story of Genesis and the birth of sin in the world. This moment also marks Banks’s most blatant insertion of the element of religious allegory into the narrative. As The Kid

begins to discover, there is a clear difference between man's and "God's law" (73), and the "distinction" between good and evil (*LM* 75) becomes ever more apparent to The Kid as he reads of the serpent's temptation of our human parents in The Garden and the subsequent shame that invokes in them. As one reviewer summarizes, "Banks introduces the novel's richest motif when the Kid reads the Adam and Eve story [...] His first reaction is to wonder whether 'the whole tree of knowledge of good and evil thing was a set up by God as a kind of pre-historic sex-sting with the Snake as the decoy [76-77].' He himself is abjectly fallen, yet he retains a strange prelapsarian innocence and honesty" (Sacks C.7). But later, as the Kid "drift[s] toward sleep," we're told that "his theological and philosophical speculations are starting to shape and misshape his reading," which concludes with this revelation: "[...] because Adam listened to the woman and ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil he [i.e., The Kid] is condemned to homelessness living in a tent somewhere east of Eden until he turns back into the dust from whence he came" (*LM* 77). A quick learner, The Kid here mimics the language of the King James Version of the Bible in mulling over his fallen condition. So by end of Part 1, when he first meets The Professor, he mistakes him for "God," who has "come down from heaven to the Causeway to tell him in person [...] that the Kid is evil [...] and reveal the nature of his punishment" (*LM* 78). Yet when he starts to recount his story to the Professor, The Kid seems archetypal, a modern-day "Everyman" in his ignorance, as the narrator will later describe him: "The Kid is one of those people who have made up the mass of mankind since the species first appeared on the plains of East Africa two or three million years ago" (*LM* 225).

The Kid and these "other men" (46), of all ages, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, thus end up "consigned to [a kind of] 'social death'" (Courteau) there "under the Causeway" (170) until the police, bowing to public pressure, bust up the camp, and then a subsequent hurricane

washes most of the rest of it away. Besides the Causeway, though, and at the farthest reaches of the county, lies the “Great Panzacola Swamp” (*LM* 303)—a fictionalized Florida Everglades Park—into which the Kid does escape, at least temporarily, toward the novel’s conclusion, and after his strange encounters with the Professor. There, he meets, in a bit of “self-intertextual[ity]”ⁱ (Collado Rodríguez 25), Dolores Driscoll, the school-bus-driver-become-town-scapegoat from Banks’s 1991 novel *The Sweet Hereafter*. Dolores is another pariah cast out by her community, and thus she empathizes with the Kid and his loner status. She sees in him something of the poor white boys of Sam Dent, New York, she used to pick up in her bus but whom she recognized were “born to lose” (*LM* 326), as she tells her old Vietnam-veteran boyfriend. Yet for a short time, the swamp appears to be less a terrible “trip into the heart of darkness” (Schulman 8) than Edenic refuge, or pre-lapsarian “paradise” (*LM* 334) before “The Fall,” as Banks figures it, into human society and moral degradation. In many ways, therefore, and despite his crime, subsequent punishment, and physical isolation, The Kid is depicted as something of a religious pilgrim in a profane, fallen world, trying to get back that original “lost touch” (*LM* 148) of skin which has been co-opted by a modern culture that has broken down the “demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism” (Hayles 3).

The Professor also seems to recognize such a change in human nature, even if his intellectualizations may be self-serving and duplicitous, especially when it comes to studying the Kid and sexual predation in general. That is, he does adopt a *strictly* sociological, rather than moral or broadly humanistic, approach to the problem of sex offenders in contemporary society. As he explains to his wife Gloria early on: “They [i.e., sex offenders] were pariahs of the most extreme sort, American untouchables, a caste of men ranked far below the merely alcoholic,

addicted, or deranged homeless. They were men beyond redemption, care, or cure, both despicable and impossible to remove and thus by most people simply wished out of existence” (LM 90). He also claims to adopt a “professional” attitude toward that problem’s “causes and possible solutions” (90). Gloria, however, who doesn’t understand his obsession, professional or not, with sex offenders, thinks they may be “*just programmed*” or “*hardwired*” that way (125; *emph. Banks’s*), to which the Professor pontificates: “There’s something in the wider culture itself that has changed in recent years, and these men are [...] the first among us to respond to that change, as if their social and ethical immune systems [...] have been somehow damaged or compromised” (LM 125). The Professor thus wants to believe, as “a sociologist,” that The Kid’s behavior is “socially determined,” since “[f]or him, social forces are the primary determinants of human behavior” (LM 153). Moreover, his “disease” model of sexual predation is of a different kind and more self-aggrandizing than not: The Professor hopes “to cure him [The Kid] of his pedophilia. And he needs to cure the Kid in order to prove his theory that pedophilia is the result of social forces, a sexual malfunction shaped by a malfunctioning society” (LM 165)-- or so he reasons and hence excuses his own, as well as The Kid’s, perverse actions.

That is, this may all be a sophisticated dodge or way of projecting--despite his air of scholarly detachment from the problem he purports to be studying--The Professor’s own bizarre psycho-sexual proclivities onto others, thereby justifying his own neuroses or “appetites” (LM 121), for want of a better word. The Professor is “a mystery man of astonishing physical bulk and gluttony,” and he can literally “eat for pages” (Schulman 8) and around the clock, at least until he passes out from the effort, only to wake up and start all over again (see LM 119-21). As to his usual sexual behaviors: he has not had intercourse with his wife for years—his enormous girth prevents it in many ways--but instead regularly masturbates on a “forest green leather

Barcalounger” while Gloria “poses” naked (*LM* 122) for him. Then there’s his sketchy background: in a turning of the tables toward the novel’s end, he has The Kid interview *him*, convinced he is about to be assassinated by members of the same “black-box agencies” (*LM* 290) for which he supposedly worked secretly as spy and double agent decades earlier. The Professor even pays The Kid a vast sum to deliver the recorded DVD to Gloria after his body is found so she can collect from the life insurance companies who might otherwise deny her payment, claiming his death was suicide. It all remains a bit murky here, just like the dank water of the drainage canal out of which the state troopers *do* pull The Professor’s body near the end (see *LM* 364), leaving The Kid, and readers, with more questions than answers concerning the Professor’s “unfathomable character” (Schulman 8).

Finally, with the introduction of “The Writer,” the last major allegorical figure presented, and the self-reflexive turn the novel takes in its closing section, Banks seems to engage in a bit of self-parody concerning his profession, or the creative writer’s stereotypical conflation of fiction and reality, since “the Writer explains that in a sense everything we read is mostly made up” (*LM* 396). Supposedly at the swamp-park on assignment with his nature magazine, The Writer--a “guy” The Kid thinks “looks like the famous writer Ernest Hemingway whose books [he] has never read [...] but he’s seen his picture in magazines and on TV” (350), and a “big bearded white-haired man” (384), like Russell Banks himself--proposes a cynical brand of behavioral psychology for The Kid to emulate in his quest for the “truth,” moral or otherwise. He contends that it hardly matters what underlies our actions and beliefs, since how we act determines who we are: as he explains curtly, “Your actions define you. If you don’t believe anything is true simply because you can’t logically prove what’s true, you won’t do anything. You won’t believe anything” (*LM* 398). While The Kid is holding out on a houseboat in the swamp, where he feels

“sort of like a pioneer” (310), and is trying to come to terms with the mystery behind The Professor’s life and death, as well as the nature of man and the problem of good and evil in “a fallen world” (344), The Writer instead “cheerfully and peculiarly extract[s] the best from a hideous situation and an unsettling ending” (Schulman 8). Here’s what he leaves us and The Kid with, if rather ingenuously: “What you’ve got to do, Kid, is forget logic, admit its limitations, suspend your disbelief and believe!” (LM 394). Well, of course that’s easier said than done, and such moral relativism, like The Professor’s version of it articulated earlier— “If everything is a lie, then nothing is. Just as, if everything is true, nothing is” (LM 235)--is certainly no solution to the larger legal, social, and ethical quandaries posed by Bank’s novel, either. Then again, it is those “unanswerable questions the Writer likes so much” (373), The Kid concludes, that will go on nagging this young protagonist well into the future, questions he cannot sweep aside so casually.

This encounter with The Writer may thus help to explain The Kid’s final return to the Causeway, which after the storm is little more than “flotsam and jetsam, a jumbled mix of building materials, trash, cardboard boxes, torn sheets of polyethylene. A tidal dump” (LM 404). Despite The Writer’s incredulity at his decision to abandon the relative safety of the swamp in the end, The Kid can only reply, “*It’s where I live*” (400; *emph. Banks’s*). He’s simply right, since “[t]here’s no escape from under the Causeway” (407), which signifies a true no-man’s-land for The Kid, who exists not “beyond good and evil” (375)—to quote The Writer’s clichéd Nietzschean philosophy—but *between* it. Or, with no “Celestial City” awaiting this pilgrim in his progress back to humanity, The Kid is instead obliged to return to that liminal space between truth and fiction, good and evil, and innocence and guilt, he has occupied before. This space is represented in the novel by “the Causeway” (400), a limbo or Purgatory, if not “Slough of

Despond” (after Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* [1678], that original fictional allegory of man’s Fall and ultimate redemption), for what many would view as our own post-historical age.

In effect, then, *Lost Memory of Skin* both incorporates and moves from the “social allegory” (O’Donnell 42) of Banks’s earlier fictions, like *The Book of Jamaica* (1980) and *Continental Drift* (1985), to a more religious one which asks, with The Kid’s circumstance: just how *do* we regain the visceral, human, and moral in a digital, post-human, and amoral world? But, unlike his caricature of The Writer in *Lost*, Banks ultimately “still defines himself as a humanist and [...] rejects the poststructuralist notion of the dissolution of the self” (Collado Rodríguez 20) or the death of the liberal human subject presumed by many recent critics. He also intimates through The Kid’s quest and eventual transformation at the end—he moves from constant shame at just “being alive” (48) to guilt for his actions, and from “his digital self” (*LM* 390) back to a more natural one—that recovering the human *is* possible, if premised upon a recognition of the limits of that postmodern relativism embodied by the likes of the narcissistic Professor and the cheerfully nihilistic Writer, neither of whom can answer for The Kid’s condition. But for Banks, as a compassionate humanist, it is what he calls a “moral and psychological” (qtd. in Wacquant 155) perspective that motivates him, and which he finds among those outcasts of society such as The Kid who, far from being “not normal” (*LM* 179), as he keeps saying, may be an all-too-typical representation of humanity at large, despite having been written off by the criminologists and legal authorities alike.

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